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ABSTRACT

As early childhood teachers apply principles of guidance rather than punishment in their classrooms, they face the challenge of avoiding a slippage into traditional discipline practices and transcending the punitive aspects of discipline. Guidance is designed to teach children democratic life skills and therefore goes beyond discipline. Teachers are professionals who rely on understanding and use conflicts as opportunities for teaching, not technicians who rely on patience and use the usual discipline techniques such as "time out." Viewing classroom conflicts as mistaken behavior, rather than as misbehavior, results in less labeling of children and more assistance in learning life skills. There are three levels of mistaken behavior: (1) behavior reflecting experimentation to learn about life; (2) behavior socially influenced by others; and (3) behavior resulting from unmet emotional or physical needs. Guidance should be used to build an encouraging classroom where all the students feel accepted as full members of the group and to maintain this enccuraging classroom where conflict management rather than "time out" is used to deal with conflict. In using conflict management procedures, teachers should guide children from high level mediation, to low level mediation, to child-negotiation. The teacher should also model and teach a consistent conflict management strategy involving a 5-step mediation process. A comprehensive approach is necessary for children with strong unmet needs. For teachers to use guidance effectively, they must build and maintain a personal and professional support system. (KB)

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Beyond Discipline to Guidance: A Primer on the Guidance Alternative

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It is common for teachers to state that for reasons of healthy child development and positive group management they use guidance rather than punishment in their early childhood classrooms. In the expression of this idea, teachers often give insufficient attention to the easy slide of conventional discipline practices into punishment. Over the next several years a challenge for teachers will be not just to go beyond punishment in their classroom practices, but to progress beyond traditional discipline as well. The concise discussion points below provide a primer of some key concepts in **guidance**, concepts that enable teachers to transcend the punitive aspects of discipline in educational philosophy and practice. These concepts are explored more fully in my articles from Young Children--"Misbehavior or Mistaken Behavior?" (July, 1995), and "Beyond Discipline to Guidance" (September, 1997)--and in my books--*A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom* (Delmar Publishers, 1998) and *What the Kids Said Today: Using Classroom Conversations to Become a Better Teacher* (Redleaf Press, 2000).

1. Guidance, More than Traditional Discipline

The problem with traditional discipline is that it too easily slides into punishment. Discipline tends to punish children for making mistakes; guidance helps children learn positive alternatives from their mistakes. Discipline tends to punish children for having problems they cannot solve; guidance teaches children to solve their problems. Traditional discipline is intended to keep children in line. The purpose of guidance is to teach children the democratic life skills they need for the 21st century, how to:

·express strong emotions in non-hurting ways

·solve problems intelligently and ethically

·understand the differing viewpoints of others

·accept others as members of the community despite human differences

2. Being a Professional, not a Technician

A teacher who is a technician reacts in a "knee-jerk" manner to problems, using the "usual" discipline techniques for that classroom, such as time-outs. The technician-teacher relies on patience--which sooner or later runs out. Technicians often feel they are the "final authority" in situations (I am here to teach and you are here to learn.)--and may feel like failures if they do not keep children in line.

A teacher who is a professional intentionally reduces "institution-caused" conflicts. S/h uses social problem solving to make informed judgments about conflicts, and to mediate solutions from which all can gain. The professional teacher relies on understanding rather than patience, and uses interventions that address the problem, but protect the self esteem of the child. The professional sees conflicts as opportunities for teaching, and works with others (including parents) in the problem solving effort. Being human the professional sometimes makes mistakes, but learns even as s/he teaches.

3. Misbehavior or Mistaken Behavior?

The problem with the term "misbehavior" is that it influences teachers to judge the the child rather than figure out how to help the child solve the problem. As a consequence teachers tend to label children and cause the children to label themselves--the self fulfilling prophecy-- often making the child's problem worse.

Young children have only months of total life experience, and they are just beginning to learn the complicated life skills that many adults still have not learned. In the process of learning these difficult skills, children--like all of us--make mistakes. A teacher who sees classroom conflicts as mistakes, through which a child

can be assisted to learn life skills, is a professional who is using guidance.

4. Experimentation Level Mistaken Behavior: Level One

There are three levels of mistaken behavior. The least serious is level one, **Experimentation Level mistaken behavior**. Children who show this level are finding out about life, either by getting emotionally involved in situations that get out of hand; or consciously try things to see what will happen. Adults look at experimentation level mistaken behavior as a potential learning experience for the child, and respond accordingly. They may give a firm but friendly response to guide the child to an alternative--but they avoid overreaction that may cause the child to feel punished over a relatively innocent mistake in judgment.

5. Socially Influenced Mistaken Behavior: Level Two

Level two mistaken behavior is **socially influenced mistaken behavior**. Either intentionally or unintentionally, others influence children toward mistaken behaviors. Level two mistaken behavior may be caused by others outside of the classroom who influence an individual child--toward swearing, for instance. Or, it may be caused by the influence of others in the classroom. This type may be "catchy" such as Socially influenced mistaken behavior is a learned behavior so the adult Because this behavior is learned, the teacher has to be firm and friendly in teaching the child more productive alternative behaviors. It is not enough to push the child to stop. The teacher needs to set positive guidelines for the child and encourage the child toward the guidelines.

With individual children, the teacher keeps interventions private. With a group, the teacher may hold a class (or family) meeting. Meetings of a teacher with children to discuss and solve a problem affecting many children can be done even with young preschoolers and is eminently preferable to old fashioned group punishments.

6. Strong Needs Mistaken Behavior: Level Three

·Level three is the most serious level of mistaken behavior, **strong needs mistaken behavior**. Strong needs mistaken behavior is the result of strong unmet emotional and/or physical needs, which the child cannot cope with or understand. It is extreme, exaggerated and almost always hurting to the child himself or to others. A child can express strong emotions at any level of mistaken behavior. But when the behavior is repeated over time, it almost always is level three. When a teacher encounters a child showing strong needs mistaken behavior, guidance is both vital and difficult to use. The following considerations in working with children at level three are important:

- ·Children may be showing strong needs mistaken behavior in your classroom because it is the safest place in their lives.
- ·There is no such thing as a bad kid, only children with bad problems that they need your help to solve.
- ·Children showing strong needs mistaken behavior are the hardest kids to like, but the ones who need a helping relationship with us the most.
- ·The more serious the mistaken behavior, the more comprehensive the approach the teacher needs to take and the more people the teacher may need to involve.
- ·Reaching and helping a child who may be stigmatized (negatively separated from the group) because of vulnerabilities the child may show, especially chronic mistaken behavior behavior, is called **liberation teaching.**
- ·Unless we practice liberation teaching with children while they are young, they may experience a life at school that is largely unsuccessful.

7. The Teacher Uses Guidance to Build the Encouraging Classroom

The encouraging classroom is place where all children feel accepted as full members of the group. From the beginning of the year, the teacher builds attachments with the children and partnerships with the parents. Making human

relation connections with each child and family are vital, including with children who are hard to understand and work with, and families who are hard to reach. In all relations, the teacher models and teaches mutual appreciation, avoiding embarrassment and building an inclusive community spirit.

8. The Teacher Uses Guidance to Maintain the Encouraging Classroom

In the encouraging classroom, the teacher uses developmentally appropriate practices that reduce the need for much mistaken behavior. But at the same time, the teacher recognizes that daily conflicts are inevitable. The teacher does not attempt to squelch all conflict, but uses the conflict that does happen as part of the curriculum, to teach democratic life skills. The teacher approaches problems as situations requiring conflict management rather than traditional discipline. The established response to mistaken behavior is conflict management, not the time out.

9. In Using Conflict Management, the Teacher Guides Children from High Level Mediation, to Low Level Mediation, to Child-Negotiation.

Conflict management--some call it conflict resolution--is earning a well deserved place as the accepted alternative to traditional interventions, such as time outs, when conflicts arise. In the book Keeping the Peace: Practicing Cooperation and Conflict Resolution with Preschoolers (New Society Publishers, 1989), Susanne Wichert promotes the teaching of negotiation skills by moving children from a high level of adult intervention, to a minimal adult role, to children taking charge.

As teachers increasingly view the every day conflicts of early childhood classrooms as learning opportunities, more needs to be made of this helpful long term strategy. When introducing conflict management as the primary method of adult intervention in a class, the adult first serves as an active coach. This I call **high level adult mediation**. In high level mediation the adult teaches the problem

solving process, outlined below, provides words if necessary to help the into the process, and guides children toward successful solving of the conflict. With toddlers and children showing level three mistaken behavior, the adult may have to remain at high level mediation for some time.

A crucial feature of conflict management is that the adult does not impose, but negotiates, a solution all can live with. The teacher knows that children have progressed in their negotiation skills when she or he is able to use **low level mediation** with them. In low level mediation, the teacher is more a facilitator than an active coach. With a minimum of prompts by the teacher, children ready for low level mediation can usually agree about a common problem, come up with possible solution, and often even implement it. The adult is there to support the process, and offer quiet leadership to enable its success. By age three and a half or so, many children without serious personal difficulties are able to progress in their negotiation skills to where low level adult mediation is enough.

The primary human relations goal in an encouraging classroom that uses guidance is children taking charge and engaging in **child negotiation**. At this level, often in response to aggressive words or actions by one child, the other calls for them to work out the problem using words, and they do! Moving children from low level mediation to child negotiation takes courage on the part of the teacher--just as moving from punishment to conflict management in general does. The teacher often is not sure whether the children will be able to negotiate and needs to hold on the initial impulse to intervene and observe instead. She or he probably always should be ready to use mediation if necessary.

Still, when conflict management is a natural part of the curriculum, even three year-olds show a propensity for child-negotiation. An instructor at a college child care center in California once shared with me this story. One day a just three year-old girl was riding a trike. A second child of the same age tried to take it from her. The first child held on to the trike, looked indignantly at the second and said, "Words, Words, Words." The second child child let go of the trike and backed away,

and found something else to do.

10. In Using Conflict Management, the Teacher Models and Teaches a Consistent strategy, Often Having Five Steps.

Many model strategies for using conflict management are out there for teachers to learn and use. I have seen conflict management strategies ranging from three steps to over fifteen! In my work, I recommend a five step mediation process for teaching children to solve their problems. First as an active coach, then as a responsive facilitator, and finally as a (sometimes nervous) onlooker, these five steps are straight forward and once learned by the teacher are productive:

One. If necessary, the parties cool down. (including her or himself). (Separation may be needed here, but not as a punishment, as a cooling down time that leads to mediation.)

Two. The children (with the teacher's help if needed) put the problem into words and agree what it is.

Three. The children (with the teacher's help if needed) come up with a few possible ways they can solve the problem.

Four. The parties decide on one solution and try it.

Five. The teacher monitors, encourages, and if necessary guides the children in trying the solution--and acknowledges their efforts.

11. The Teacher Uses a Comprehensive Approach with Children who Have strong Unmet Needs

Children respond positively when teachers build relations with them and their parents, and build and maintain an encouraging classroom. But children with strong unmet needs may be too burdened to respond to general guidance practices and all but high level conflict mediation. These children need a comprehensive approach that includes most or all of the following steps:

a) Encouragement for children to build healthy attachments with one or more

staff.

b) Assistance in handling situations that may become trying to them before crises occur.

c) Firm and friendly intervention that may include a cooling down time, but always includes mediation and/or a guidance talk, which helps them: understand the reasons for why the intervention was necessary; learn what they can do instead next time; figure out how to make the other parties feel better; figure out how to rejoin the group.

d) Meetings of staff, and staff with parents, that use the five steps of conflict management (in this context, the five steps of social problem solving) to set a coordinated course of action)

e) The inclusion of other adults as needed, including referrals, if additional steps are needed. (The more serious the problem, the more comprehensive the solution). As professionals, teachers collaborate to accomplish with others what they cannot alone.

12. **The teacher builds a personal/professional support system.**

For teachers to use guidance effectively, they must build and maintain support systems. In the classroom, they actively work to build a teaching team--adults with differing backgrounds and educational credentials who work together for the good of all members of the encouraging classroom. The adult seeks to build mutually supportive relations with other staff so all know they can rely on each other in times of crises and long term need.

Outside of the classroom teachers seek positive connections with family, friends, and community. The teacher recognizes that she or he must meet personal needs in order to sustain the ability to help children and families grow and develop. This understanding is the first and last step in successfully using guidance. It is a reality that the world outside of the early childhood community needs to better understand.